Top Ten Things You Need To Know To Be A CYBER GEEK

Even If You Just Bought Your First Computer

By Kevin Savetz

New to computers and wondering how long it takes to become a savvy, computer-literate cyber geek like your friends, spouse, or co-workers? Not long—the following items will start you on the path from being a mere computer user to becoming a full-fledged geek.

Being a geek is its own reward: as a geek, you will be able to understand what goes on inside your computer, engage in those formerly cryptic conversations about serial ports, megabytes and RAM allocation, and be able to find help for your nagging computer problems—and help others solve theirs.

1. If Something Goes Wrong, It's Not (Necessarily) Your Fault

Although it is frustrating when things don't work the way they're supposed to—especially when they worked just fine yesterday—try to avoid the temptation to reinstall your operating system, futz with your config files, defragment your hard disk, and wave a dead chicken over the computer in the hopes of remedying the problem. If your application crashes, doesn't work right, or otherwise acts in an unseemly manner, simply reboot the computer and try again. Perhaps it has been awake for too long, maybe it's feeling peaked. Start with the basics when solving a problem, never assume the worst.

If what you're doing involves someone else, don't assume the problem is on your end. (Sure, it may be, but a geek isn't afraid to share the blame.) Case in point: a caller to the technical support line of an online service can't get online today. "I reinstalled the software and switched COM ports and changed all my IRQs, but I still can't log on!" The reply: the online service has been down all afternoon; *no one* can log on. There goes a lovely summer afternoon, needlessly wasted.

2. Know Everything About Your Computer

This bit of geekiness comes in handy very often—and as a bonus, is a great way to impress other geeks. By knowing every detail about your system, you will make software configuration, technical support, and future upgrades simpler. Grab your computer's manual, and turn to the back. Somewhere in fine print you'll find a list of specifications. Learn them! What's the processor type and speed? How much RAM do you have? How much hard disk space? How fast is that CD-ROM drive?

The obscenely geeky take this advice to the next level: they know the type of bus on their system, the transfer rate of the hard disk, and the configuration of the IRQs.

This technical mumbo-jumbo may seem like brain clutter today, but it will become useful some day soon when a program, salesman or friend asks about the finer points of your computer's innards.

3. Know Where To Find A Bargain On Computer Stuff

I won't tell you that you need a killer system to be a cyber geek—quite the contrary, one's propensity for geekdom has very little to do with the amount of money one can afford to blow on computer toys—uh, accessories.

But when a geek does upgrade his computer, he needs to know where to find the best deals. If his town has a gizmo outlet, he will be casing the joint at the grand opening. If the local computer stores are overpriced, he is content in the knowledge that there is a waist-high stack of computer-oriented mail order catalogs back home. And he knows in his heart that the best ads for cheap stuff aren't in the slick, glossy magazines, they're in the thick ones that are printed on newsprint (like *MicroTimes*!) He scans the classified ads, newsgroups and flea markets for deals. He knows that one person's trashed parts is another's dream come true.

4. Know What's On The Other Side Of That Modem

Most hardcore geeks use a modem, but you aren't truly a geek until you understand what

you're connected to on the other side of that modem. Three main places you may connect to are the Internet, an online service, and a bulletin board system. These are three distinct entities.

First, let's look at a commercial online service, like America Online (AOL). AOL is a service that runs primarily on several powerful computers in Virginia. AOL provides information from a wide variety of sources—news, chat rooms, a reference desk, bulletin boards and so on. The America Online company runs the show—it decides what information to feature, and organizes the information in a (hopefully) logical manner.

On the other hand, the Internet is not an online service, it is a computer network. It is not centered in any one place—the computers that comprise the Internet are literally all over the world. The Internet is not run by any one company or person; every company, organization and individual that has a computer connected to the Internet controls their own equipment and works cooperatively to assure that the network as a whole runs smoothly.

A bulletin board system (BBS) is a small operation—perhaps a single computer run by an individual. A BBS can have the same sort information as an online service, but on a much smaller scale.

To confuse the matter a little: the Internet, online services and BBSes can work together. For instance, you can access the Internet

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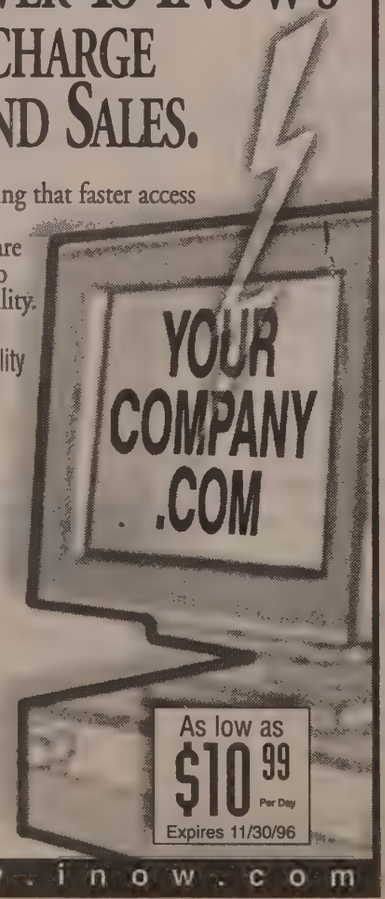

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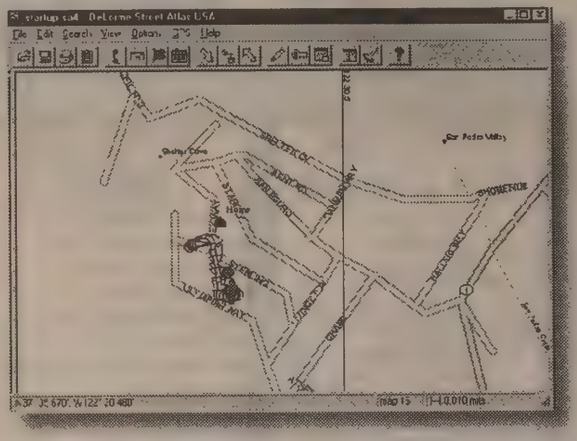

Delorme Street Atlas USA

Street Atlas product offers the entire USA down to the street level on a single CD, while AAA Map 'n' Go sacrifices some of the small town data for a complete listing of the famous AAA Tourbook series. Delorme also offers a package, Tripmate, that includes a GPS receiver, data cable and Street Atlas software for a rock-bottom bargain of $149.

Chicago Map, formerly known as Just SoftWorks, offers Precision Mapping 2.0, available on the street for only about $30. However, to use your GPS receiver, you'll need the GPS upgrade for another $60. They also offer a kit that consists of a Garmin 38 GPS, data cable and all the software for $289 retail.

Microsoft will probably have released their entry into the street mapping/GPS capable software arena by the time this is published. Their Automap software is familiar in previous incarnations to a lot of us.

We did finally find Catalina that foggy afternoon. We promised the women that we'd just sail for an hour to the west and then give up if we didn't find the island. Two hours later, Catalina appeared out of the fog. ■

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"experts" clearly don't know what they're talking about.

After all, anyone can learn HTML over a weekend, design a Web page and then smugly print up business cards with the title "Webmaster." I've seen business people bandy about terms like "applet" and "JavaScript" without a whisper of an idea of how they work. Call me snide, but I think a geek judges a person by what he really knows, not by what his business card says.

8. RTFM

A cyber geek isn't afraid to read the manual. Users who don't read the manual before asking questions with simple answers are often admonished to RTFM — "read the 'fine' manual" (substitute your favorite f-word).

But to a true geek, "RTFM" goes beyond knowing to look in the index of the manual when there's a problem. A true geek will read the manual anywhere, anytime—on the bus, while on hold, or during a lunch break. A particularly geeky friend learned most of everything he knows about the UNIX operating system while in the bathroom: he had an entire 32-volume set of manuals in there. Today, he is a UNIX system administrator.

Reading the manual when you don't need to means you'll know the solution to a question or problem when it surfaces. You'll save time and effort, and you'll be a hero to those around you. (If your friends and co-workers are not geeks, they'll be in awe of your knowledge. If they are, they'll appreciate your company that much more!)

9. Don't Be Afraid To Do It Yourself

A seasoned geek doesn't give a second thought to jiggling cables, installing memory, or swapping out the hard drive on his system (assuming, of course, that it is turned off!). Don't be afraid to learn what goes on inside that magic grey box. It doesn't take any special training to install a couple of memory chips (just a steady hand,) nor do you need a certificate from a technical school to install a CD-ROM drive. Just RTFM and give it a try. If you do get stuck, then by all means seek the help of a professional. At least you tried.

(Many geeks have a weak sort of pride because they take their computers apart so often. Most geeks don't even have the cases screwed on to their PCs, for easy access.)

OK, some folks may be absolutely unwilling to stick a screwdriver in the back of that (very expensive) machine. This attitude is also understandable. Still, hang around and watch as the computer consultant or repair person installs that CD-ROM drive. You might learn something about how your computer works, which can be useful even if you never delve into its innards yourself.

10. Geeks Help Each Other

If you see a fellow computer user in distress, and you just happened to learn the solution to the problem while reading in the bathroom the day before, help him out. If he's a geek himself, you will have come to the aid of a fraternal brother. If he isn't, consider yourself a missionary from the world of cyber geekdom. Perhaps you'll help bring someone new into the fray. After all, it's not so bad being a geek. ■

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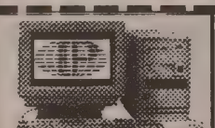

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through America Online. Conversely, Internet users can access AOL by sending electronic mail to AOL members, and visiting members' Web pages.

5. Beta Software Is Evil

Only a couple of years ago, it was a privilege to be allowed to "beta test" software—that is, to receive a pre-release version of a program, to check it for bugs and try out all the new features. Beta testing meant you could be the first on your block to try new software. You had a reasonable assurance that the program worked well enough, and probably wouldn't crash your system. The programs were almost done—"feature-complete"—you just needed to look for bugs.

That has all changed. Today, many software companies have embraced the idea of "public betas," which means a company will put their half-baked program on the Internet or an online service and allow a few hundred thousand people to download it. These programs are not "feature complete"; in fact, they're nowhere near ready for prime time. They crash systems left and right, and they have more bugs than an Ant Farm™. Two days later, the company will release a marginally better version of the program online, and the frenzy will start again.

A cyber geek is certainly interested in the latest tools and toys for his computer, but most geeks aren't willing to trust embryonic software from a company that has no qualms about releasing a program that is not ready for the light of day.

Some geeks take this attitude a step further: "Never buy version 1.0 of anything," they say. Many jaded users believe that the first version of any software product will be so buggy as to be useless, and that you should wait until the first update is released. This geek isn't that cynical, but I do make sure there is a money-back guarantee on all the software I buy—especially if it is version 1.0.

6. Be A Comfortable Geek

Your computer and the space around it should be comfortable — invest in a comfortable chair, an ergonomic keyboard and good lighting for your computer area. Also, learn to touch type... it's easier on your back and neck when you look across at the screen rather than down at the keyboard (and it's another good way to impress your fellow geeks.)

Being a comfortable geek goes beyond good ergonomics and lighting. Populate your workspace with the things that make you happy. For some, this might mean pictures of your family or pets. For me, it means a variety of toys which I can play with while geeking out: a Koosh ball, a Wheel-O, a Figit and a Magic 8-Ball clutter my desk. (What do I do with these things? I "frob" them—a geek term that means "aimless manipulation of an object, just for fun.")

7. Remember: Everyone Thinks He Is An Expert

Perhaps I have been jaded by years of working around lots of other geeks, but one thing became clear early on: everyone seems to think he is an expert. Many of the people I've dealt with are clearly knowledgeable in their fields, but some of these so-called

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